

Chapter 19: Finally, Home

When I returned to the nursery, Korix was sprawled on the floor while Leski was transfixed by her work on the wall. Watching her suck on her lip, I collapsed beside my life partner, leaning into him.

“She’s not bad,” I said.

Korix rested his head on mine with a snort.

“I asked her to do the flowers for a reason, Zae. Her sense of proportion...”

He shuddered.

“But yes, for someone who’s new to this art form, she’s all right.”

With a scowl in place, I glared up at him as much as I could, but he only patted my knee.

“She’s rejecting nerve signals from her ears to give us privacy,” Korix said. “Probably listening to that Maliva piece she’s obsessed with right now.”

“Ah.”

While I collected my thoughts, Leski added brilliant purple and teal to her floral collection, and Korix patiently waited.

“You were right,” I eventually managed. “It has to do with Pheniks.”

Korix lifted his head off of mine, pulling away.

“You heard that?” he asked before shaking his head. “What am I thinking? Of course you did. I taught you how to catalogue what’s happening around you, no matter what state you’re in.”

“Mm,” I hummed. “I’d probably remember everything from the last two days if I let myself.”

Maybe. But I supposed whether I could do it didn’t matter. Unless something made me, I had no intention of thinking about the specifics of what had happened.

“Two days?” Korix asked.

Sighing, I said, “I’ll get to that, Ko.”

With a hesitant nod, Korix settled against me once more.

“So. Pheniks?” he asked.

“Pheniks,” I said.

With nausea threatening to rise up my throat, I burrowed into Korix, and every reduction of the space between us lent me strength. I could only speak these dreaded, hated words when I felt entirely safe and secure.

“I betrayed my brother.”

With my confession in the open, I started trembling, falling into myself until I approached a point that no one could rescue me from.

“Are you sure that’s what you did?” Korix asked.

Tensing, I lifted my eyes to him with frost spreading through me at an alarming rate.

“What?” I said with my voice dead.

“All I’m saying is that when it comes to loved ones, you tend to blow things out of proportion,” Korix said. “Half of the time, the supposed disaster comes nowhere close to your perception of it.”

I took a moment to consider this, and... he was right. My family and partners had always been the one thing I’d struggled to remain calm about.

Sitting up, I rested my chin on Korix’s shoulder.

“Are you calling me a drama queen?” I asked.

Rolling his eyes, Korix said, “You certainly enjoy drama enough for the title. So? Is your problem with Pheniks as horrible as you think it is?”

Biting my lip, I rocked my head back and forth with one eye closed.

“It might not be,” I eventually concluded. “I went to Talira with what I discovered, and she promised to help but...”

“You don’t trust her?” Korix asked.

“I’d love to say that I do,” I said, “but I definitely don’t.”

“Hmm.”

We fell silent, grinning at Leski when she snuck glances at us. She probably wanted to be with us, which I couldn’t fault. I hadn’t given her enough of my time lately, even before my recent mission.

“Is that all of it?” Korix said. “Considering that you defaulted on our last chat, I thought you’d have more to say.”

“It’s just more of the same. This year’s been tough, Ko, but Talira gave me a few days. We can talk everything out over the course of them. Dilute the strain on us,” I said. “But what about you? Any progression since our last check-in?”

I hoped that wasn’t the case. His last fall into the past had seemed like it might herald an increase in symptoms, but maybe I was wrong.

For a moment, Korix rubbed my arm without speaking, but then, he shifted.

“I’m... seeing... *things* more,” he said. “It’s still manageable, so there’s no need to worry, but it’s... new.”

Damn. Looked like I’d been right.

“Ok. Thanks for telling me.”

Smiling, Korix kissed my forehead.

“It’s our arrangement, is it not?” he said.

In answer, I lowered my face to his chest, breathing him in. This was how our check-in system worked. We started with a chat about everything that was concerning us, and then, we slept on it. In the morning, we discussed possible, new coping methods. It worked for us.

“You two done?” Leski asked in an overly loud voice.

After exchanging a glance with Korix, I nodded at her, and she winced, shaking her head.

“Great,” she said. “Can I get some help, then?”

She held out a paintbrush, and I leapt to claim it. Together, we worked on our baby’s mural, Leski with her flowers and Korix adding knights to his castle. I didn’t know how I’d missed it for over a hundred years, but apparently, he liked classic fantasy tales.

I got stuck staring at my assigned section of the wall, unsure of what I wanted to add. What did I want my child to look at during the first formative years of their life? It needed to be something I could quickly complete. Who knew how much time I could spend here in the coming months?

Eventually, I started painting with no end goal in mind, letting my unconscious mind guide me. It was strangely meditative, imparting a measure of peace, but every so often, my gaze drifted to my forearm, where blood had been leaking not long ago.

Getting what I needed had come so much more quickly that way, but it had become compulsive too. My hand had refused to stop its carve into me. I didn’t know which was better: the slow and steady pace or the quick and highly addictive one. Why wasn’t there something in between?

Dimly, I was aware of first Leski and then Korix leaving me to get some sleep. Their kisses on my cheek blended with the spread of paint across drywall, and their good night wishes mixed with the rustle of my brush's bristles in the wall's pockmarks.

I wasn't sure how late it was when I finished, but when I stepped back, I knew the contentment spreading through me was showing through my smile. This image was exactly what I wanted my child to see every time they woke up.

Heavy fingers dropped my paintbrush, and as I made my way to our bedroom, fatigue nipped at me. I stumbled down halls and through a door, and when I reached it, I toppled into bed with my clothes halfway off before falling victim to sleep.

I dreamed about my brother. With a wild visage, Pheniks appeared in front of me, halfway concealed by a foreboding door, and he asked me one question without end. Why, why, why, why, why, why-?

Something yanked me free of the nightmare, although I wasn't sure what it was. Maybe it was someone turning me onto my back.

Maybe it was the warmth that wrapped itself around my entire body. Considering... everything, I was keyed up enough for these usually safe—and therefore, unable to wake me up—things to rattle me straight to full awareness.

Gasping, I snapped my eyes open, only for one of my partners to brush their fingers along my chest with shushing sounds.

"It's all right. You're all right."

After a moment where I got my breathing under control, I said, "Leski?"

She hummed.

"Nightmare?" the partner on my right... Korix sleepily said.

"...Yeah. I didn't mean to wake you two up."

Snuggling closer, Leski said, "'s ok. We're just glad you're home."

I tried to get back to sleep. Truly, I did. Closing my eyes, I nestled as close to my partners as I could get, but *something*—a fizz of electricity under my skin or a sense of unease—kept my brain from slipping into oblivion. Caught in this state, I tried to stay still, to not fidget, but apparently, I still did that enough that my partners noticed it.

A quiet sigh soon broke the quiet, and before I could apologize for keeping them up, soft kisses were leaving popping sparks along my chest and side. I fought to organize my thoughts and say something to let them know I was ok, but I couldn't force a single word out until my clothes started getting tugged on. Only then could I reach down to stop them.

"No," I said. "I'm too..."

What? I was too *what*? I knew what Korix and Leski were offering: a tried-and-true method to get me relaxed when I was this tense, but something about the situation tonight didn't feel right.

It didn't matter anyway. Whoever I'd pulled away from me was quickly replaced with my other partner, and I forgot all of the backed-up words I'd meant to say.

"You're too good?" Leski said. "Too kind? Too caring?"

"Please," I begged. "Stop."

And the persistent sense of warmth around me retreated. And two weights settled into place on either side of me.

"Is that what you really want?" Korix said. "For us to stop? Or is something else going on?"

I didn't know *what* the problem was, too disoriented from so many emotions throughout the day and a nightmare disturbing my sleep and the sense of need that both of them had pushed me into. I didn't know what was wrong with me, and not having a name for this weird sense of turmoil inside scared me a little.

Even still, I tried to voice it.

"I don't feel right or in control," I said, throwing an arm over my face, "and in this state, I'm afraid that I'll somehow take advantage of you."

They were silent for an agonizingly long moment, and then, my arm was pulled away from me.

"You who I can never love," Korix said, "how can you take advantage of what we want to freely give?"

And I peeled my eyes open. I saw them looking down on me with concern, watching them grin with their unique ways of conveying their want. For a brief second, I let myself think outside of my current misery, allowing myself a moment to realize that I *needed* to relax. Maybe the tried-and-true method would work.

"Ok," I said, even if a knot of unease was still snarled behind my breastbone.

Grinning, Leski bent down to me, occluding Korix, and I rose to meet her lips, but she just pushed me back into the sheets.

"No. You relax," she said. "When's the last time you thought only of yourself, letting someone else take care of you?"

"I don't want-" I started.

Leski shoved a finger against my lips.

“No lies, Zae. Not even with this,” she said. “So long as you’re ok with it, please let us do as we like.”

When she lifted her finger, I could only swallow and nod, and with a soft laugh, Leski pressed her lips to mine while Korix skimmed his hands over my body. We stayed here for a while, but eventually, I’d had enough of it.

As I flipped Leski onto her back, settling on my hands and knees over her, I knew something should keep my tongue from opening her mouth, but I didn’t remember what it was. I didn’t let myself remember it.

Korix hugged me from behind, sweeping his fingers over my chest and abdomen, and from his insistent press against me, I didn’t think he cared how soft of a body my last persona had required. He brushed his lips along my spine, raising hairs all over my body, and when Leski pulled my waist to hers, trapping me between them, I joined them in a combination of soft curses and praises to all the holy things that we didn’t believe in.

That was when I got the alert.

Someone’s at the door, it read.

I knew Korix and Leski had gotten the same message, but they didn’t respond to it. So, rolling my eyes, I dug my mind out of the pit of lust I’d been submerged in.

“Who is it?” I asked in sub-vocals.

First Stratus Pheniks of House Zan was my response.

Sucking in a breath, I went cold while my partners peeled away from me with furrowed faces.

“Give me a visual,” I said.

I lifted my hand, and above my palm, my brother appeared, pounding on the front door. His hair was standing up in spikes with his clothes disheveled and his face unshaven, and he was shouting at no one.

“Please, Zae! Let me in! I- I need help. Please!”

My heart was a stone in my chest. Taking hold of my elbow, Korix shook his head.

“Zaeden, don’t-”

“Let him in,” I said.

Folding my hand on an image of Pheniks, I got out of bed, shoving impediments aside. I barely remembered to grab my clothes before racing into the hall with raised voices fading behind me.

In this moment, I didn't care what they said. My little brother needed me. Hell, if I wouldn't help him.

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